Response to Ron Rubin’s “Independence, Disengagement and Discipline”

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Ron Rubin begins his article titled, “Independence, Disengagement and Discipline,” with an anecdotal note a principal received from a student. Amid misspellings and grammatical faux pas, the student bemoans the lack of autonomy he has at his school. The student complains that he must automatically follow the arcane rules his teachers ordain. He does not feel valued, and he does not feel a sense of belonging in his community. Rubin believes that students misbehave and disengage due to their lack of autonomy and he offers solutions to increase student engagement.

Rubin warns that when students’ needs for independence are ignored, young adults become disengaged and resistant (2012). Although many educators are aware of this, many fear that giving students independence and power will backfire. They worry anarchy will ensure. Instead of finding a sense of balance between rules and autonomy, teachers fall into the role of rule-maker and disciplinarian. Students respond to the strict structures of school with a passive compliance, which is detrimental to learning. The author mentions studies proving a strong, positive correlation between a student’s ability to make decisions in the classroom and greater academic motivation, academic improvement and positive behavior. Likewise, studies show that student participation in goal setting leads to positive classroom growth and environment.

This said, the author is not suggesting students rule the classroom entirely. He recognizes the need for rules and student compliance to minimize dangerous behaviors and disruptions. Still, he knows that teaching passivity and compliance will never lead to proactive responsibility. Since schools in a democracy have goals greater than mere compliance, the ABC model of behavior is too simplistic for managing a classroom conducive to learning. ABC stands for “Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence,” and many school administrators and teachers focus on creating consequences to quell disruptive behaviors. On the other hand, Rubin stresses The Circle of Courage. Based on ecology and developmental psychology, the Circle of Courage states that school personnel should focus on meeting students’ needs for belonging, mastery, independence and generosity.

In order to do this, the author suggests nurturing a sense of belonging for students by replacing zero-tolerance policies with zero-reject relationships. He encourages educators to move beyond extrinsic rewards to intrinsic ones. He encourages schools to move beyond coercive discipline to collaborative problem solving, and suggests that schools nurture generosity by prioritizing a sense of community over a “get-it-at-all-costs” mentality (2012). Rubin clarifies, “In ecological terms, the best way to transform disengaged students is to transform the climate of the school” (2012).

In order to determine student engagement, one must look for “intrinsic motivation; higher order thinking; increased social, emotional, and academic competence; and creativity, productivity, and moral thinking” (2012). Although lofty ideals, the author ascertains that educators must prepare students for conscientious independence. He concludes, “Educators have a much deeper purpose than simply preparing children to fit in like cogs in a wheel. Instead, they must recognize their obligation to help children learn how to shape the present and future rather than merely conform to the status quo” (2012).

Ron Rubin is a Safe Schools and educational consultant, whose primary focus is on creating school environments where students work together effectively. From examining his sources, one can see that his primary interest is on creating safe and efficient learning communities superior to current classroom environments. One of Rubin’s sources includes Alfie Kohn, the author of *Beyond Discipline*. Kohn stresses the importance of creating classroom cultures, environments and instruction relevant to the students’ and their needs. He writes, "A huge proportion of unwelcome behaviors can be traced to a problem with what students are being asked to learn.... [A] focus on forgettable facts and isolated skills, the use of textbooks and worksheets, grades, and quizzes ... is not only disappointing in its intellectual outcomes but also likely to lead kids to act out....” (2006). Rote memorization, worksheets, direct-instruction can bore a student to delirium or delinquency. Rubin agrees that instruction methods need to change and vary in order to capture student attention.

Krohn continues, “If I were a student subjected to a diet of direct instruction and scripted teaching, I suspect that I, too, would be rebelling in some way—and, of course, I would then be identified as the problem. It's easy to imagine, by analogy, a foreman in a sweatshop asking for advice about how to deal with workers who have a 'poor attitude' because they resist doing repetitive, unengaging tasks about which they have nothing to say” (2006). He is stating that poor, unchallenging curricula create and inspire bad behaviors.

After reading both Rubin’s own research and Kohn’s research, one can conclude that Rubin believes classroom management is broader than mere protocol for poor student behavior. Student behavior should be managed with more than positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement and punishments. Teachers should focus on creating a classroom where students are active participants who will eventually internalize motivation to succeed and bring good to the world.

I agree with the author that student ennui causes misbehavior. Instruction should be interactive, compelling, interesting and challenging. I agree that a solution to student misbehavior is that educators should nurture a sense of belonging for students within the school community, encourage intrinsic motivation, move beyond coercive discipline to collaborative problem solving, and nurture generosity by prioritizing a sense of community over a “get-it-at-all-costs” attitude. Teachers and schools should focus on nurturing the entire student, not just his academic abilities. School has become very routinize and passé. Students are no longer forced to think creatively. Instead, they regurgitate facts, fill in the blanks and finish projects in front of the TV. Students should be able to think inventively in school, feel a part of the community and foster long-lasting relationships with other students.

I find the concept of handling student misbehaviors with collaborative problem solving intriguing. This would need to be something that the entire school would support and encourage. I would find this difficult to implement as a secondary high school teacher, who only sees her students for 50-minutes a day. I would not have time for this. However, as an administrator, this could be highly effective if handled appropriately. Even low performing high schools could benefit from this. The students could have a sense of responsibility and control in their outcomes.

On the other hand, I understand why my high school would be unable to implement this. Our administrators need to “police” the hallways, stop fights and confiscate lethal weapons- daily. We would need full-time personnel to manage collaborative problem solving, which we cannot afford. Also, students would need to engage in this; many would not. The author writes, “When basic needs are met, children like school and are motivated to learn” (2012). My students’ basic needs are not met. They are not motivated to learn, because they are still trying to survive.

I love Rubin’s ideas, and I plan to implement them to the best of my abilities in my classroom, but I do not think I could focus on only Rubin’s ideas for classroom management and classroom culture. Although ideal, it may not be feasible in my classroom.

I have learned that carefully planned autonomy is essential for the secondary classroom. Students must be a part of a community, where they have an essential role. Additionally, discipline can be avoided with carefully planned, interesting, appropriately challenging and engaging lessons. This will have a very positive effect on education if implemented. Students deserve to have a challenging, engaging education in a safe community where they belong.

References

Rubin, R. (2012). Independence, Disengagement, and Discipline. *Reclaiming Children & Youth*,*21*(1), 42-45.